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In the Essence of the Gourd

Abstract

Linus had relished the quiet times when Charlie left to scavenge for copper. Alone, he'd squat on his blue blanket beside the enormous pumpkin and whisper into the stem just how much he loved it. For hours he'd lean close, brushing his lips against the orange flesh, and discuss whatever came to mind—Giant Pumpkin growing season, Giant Pumpkin growing tips, Giant Pumpkin growing records.

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March 14, 2014

In the Essence of the Gourd

Fiction by Ian Golding

Linus had relished the quiet times when Charlie left to scavenge for copper. Alone, he'd squat on his blue blanket beside the enormous pumpkin and whisper into the stem just how much he loved it. For hours he'd lean close, brushing his lips against the orange flesh, and discuss whatever came to mind—Giant Pumpkin growing season, Giant Pumpkin growing tips, Giant Pumpkin growing records.

And when Charlie returned late in the evening with his stained yellow shirt and an armful of junk to pawn, Linus would say, "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown," and wipe each leaf free of dust and act like it was just a pumpkin and that he was not kissing it.

And that was the good period.

Now, there was no celebration, no hidden romance, and nobody was kissing nobody. Now, Linus sucked his thumb at the church outreach center. He sat in front of his bowl of cereal and watched as the untouched flakes sogged and sank beneath the milk. Now, there were pumpkin problems. Just that morning he had found another pockmark on the once-untarnished orange, the third this week.

But Charlie was too deep in fantasy to care. Spurted out between mouthfuls of cereal, he talked about making a TV special about the Giant Pumpkin, about making it back to the big screen as a star. "Peanuts is timeless," he said, pulverized

cornflakes speckling his teeth. “And Hollywood could really use some down-to-earth dudes like us.”

And as Charlie dreamed and other homeless men finished breakfast and funneled out into the heat of the day, Linus sat silent and sucked his thumb. With a sick pumpkin, what was the point? He refused to eat. He would go hungry. Starve. He would suffer until the Great Pumpkin was healthy. He wanted a sign, a miracle. He wanted to sit right there until his essence had rotted and spilled across the linoleum floor.

But it was not meant to be. Once everyone was gone, the pastor patted Linus’s shoulder and told him, in the same voice he used to spread the word of the Lord, that Retiree Bingo started at noon. It was time to go.

“The pumpkin needs sunscreen,” Linus said, letting go of his blanket to grab the wrist of the bewildered volunteer. “We need sunscreen.”

#

“Today, your name is Ketchup,” Charlie said as they neared the corner. “Not Linus. Ketchup.”

With such a late start, they had missed most of the commuters. Only the late-shift stragglers remained, and they were tough as railroad ties. It took something original, something spectacular, to get their spare change.

“You’re my older brother that Momma dropped, and now you’re slow in the head. It’s called

Life with Brain Damage, Charlie Brown.”

Everyone pitied a charity case, really dug deep in their pockets, and today Charlie was pulling out all the stops. He combed his few thick strands of hair to the side and rubbed glitter on Linus’s cheek. He reached into his sack.

“This is yours,” he said, handing Linus a jar of ketchup. “When I get their attention, shake their hands, whatever, I’m telling them that’s all you’ll eat since the accident.”

Linus nodded and leaned over, trying to look in the sack. “Is there any sunscreen in there?”

“All you need to do is squeeze that stuff all over yourself. Put some emotion in it. Make them feel guilty.”

“But what about sunscreen? What about the Great Pumpkin?”

“It’s sad, I’ll say, and the person will say, yeah.”

#

“I’m going to call him Boot Face,” Linus said, patting the cage as they wandered through the grocery store.

The trapped raccoon tried biting his fingers through the grating. It clawed at the corners and gnawed at the metal wires. It stared out with its one good eye and hissed. Linus giggled. With Boot Face near, he felt a million times better. The Great Pumpkin’s roots had dried out overnight, but he was okay. The meat aisle smelled delicious, but Linus’s hunger did not ache. The store’s strict rule on pets didn’t faze him.

“Can’t we call him Snoopy?” Charlie said, tearing open a package of processed lunch meat. “Remember how much easier things were before we had to put him down?”

Linus nodded his round head, sucked his thumb. “Yeah, I remember. But he’s gone, Charlie Brown. Boot Face is our new mascot.”

They had discussed adding an animal to their act, a creature so adorable that any passerby would instinctively slow to run their fingers through its soft fur. Boot Face was not that animal. Its fur had been matted with blood when they found it. Its right eye was gouged out. It walked with a determined limp, glaring its teeth to anything nearby. Boot Face had been mean as could be when they found it, and nothing much had changed. It refused to sit, to roll over, to even wear the baby bonnet Charlie had struggled to force over its pointed face.

And yet there it was: Boot Face, their new mascot. Linus had spent his life waiting on the Great Pumpkin. He’d waited every year for it, hoping it’d grow in his honest patch, and now here beside their camp, he watched its slow decay in front of him.

The leaves turned black; the vines shriveled. If they couldn't get sunscreen, then they were desperate for a change, some fresh support, he explained.

"I mean, sure, Boot Face isn't in perfect condition, what with the crushed paw and the tail thing," Linus said. "But he sure is cute."

Linus rattled the cage and brought the hissing mascot to his face.

Charlie was quiet, stuffing folds of bologna into his pocket as the two loitered near the cooler. "Just keep it away from me," he said, peeling wet slices of the beige meat, his slimy fingers still bloodied from getting Boot Face dressed.

A woman farther down talked on her cellphone and stared at rows of skinless, boneless chicken breasts. She chatted on her cellphone while her son tugged on her cardigan. He watched the raccoon bash its pointed face against the metal cage. He jumped up and down in excitement, his little bowl cut bobbing right along with him.

"Kitty," the boy squealed.

Charlie dropped the rest of the bologna into the cooler and turned his back. He tried to act casual as Linus walked up to the boy.

"He's a raccoon," Linus clarified. "His name is Boot Face."

#

"Look, I don't want to hear it. If you didn't spend your whole morning with a raccoon and a pumpkin, then maybe you could think of an idea."

Linus stared at his army fatigues and shook his head in disappointment. He'd always hated *You're Not the Only Charlie, Charlie Brown*.

"Now, for the last time, we're Vietnam vets and the Man let us down. I saw kids getting sprayed in machine-gun fire. Kids, man. Kids."

"What about me?" Linus said, his blanket dragging on the sidewalk, his stomach growling. It was the first time he'd left the Great Pumpkin and Boot Face alone. It felt weird.

“You breathed in enough Agent Orange to shrivel your voice box, and now you can’t say a peep about pumpkins,” Charlie said, ruffling up his hair. “But show some emotion.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Just think about that one actor I like. He knows so much about these things.”

“I don’t know, Charlie Brown,” Linus said. “The veteran stuff always works better with the rest of the gang.”

Charlie froze. He turned around. He gripped Linus’s camouflage. “What did I say about mentioning them?”

“Gosh, Charlie Brown. Sorry. I think about them sometimes, I guess.”

“Well, don’t. They left me—us. They left us,” Charlie said, letting go of Linus. “We don’t need them. We’ll make it back to the top on our own.”

Linus sucked his thumb.

#

“How magical is the Great Pumpkin?” Linus would ask a few times every day. And though Charlie said nothing and moved not one muscle in response, Linus would point to Boot Face and say, “That’s how magical.”

Unlike the other raccoons, not to mention the deer, opossums, groundhogs, squirrels, rabbits, various lizards, buzzards, coyotes, armadillos, turtles, cats, dogs, and everything else they’d seen bloated and bleeding along the highway, this raccoon, this Boot Face, had lived.

“Why?” Linus asked, but gave no pause before continuing. “Because it tasted the Great Pumpkin.”

Proof, Linus was certain, that the sagging pumpkin was still potent with essence. Boot Face, once a raccoon, was now the first miracle performed by the Great Pumpkin. Gourd and coon, intertwined, their essences running through one another.

To think that Charlie had planted the pumpkin for such trivial purposes. How he had gotten so excited when the first little leaf budded above soil. How he had practiced his speech every night, sure to say how thankful he was for winning the state fair largest-gourd contest. How he planned on making a new TV special without Sally or Lucy or Franklin or Schroeder or anyone who had abandoned the troupe. How he'd say that pumpkin raising was his calling instead of, say, kicking a football. It all seemed so long ago. It had grown past their expectations and, in doing so, had absorbed so much essence.

It was a powerful gourd, and in Linus's imagination it had grown to a mythical size. He knew that it was the Great Pumpkin that made him quiver at night and not his hunger. He knew that it altered the weather, that the earth's very orbit was in question. Every day the news reported forest fires, earthquakes, the dead and suffering from great tidal tsunamis, and many other pumpkin-related issues.

And yet, when he told Charlie of the pumpkin's power, Linus was saddened.

"You don't say," his friend would say, half asleep. "Is that right?"

He refused to buy it sunscreen, refused to protect it. And if Charlie can't believe its essence now, Linus asked himself, would he ever believe it?

#

"This one is simple. *It's Terminal, Charlie Brown*. You've got gut cancer so bad you can't speak or swallow, and I'm the doctor who can heal you if we get a few bucks."

Charlie was talking fast. They were going to be late. Linus said nothing, his hospital gown hanging from his shoulders, his thumb lodged in his mouth. He did his best to keep up.

"Look," Charlie said, without turning around, "you wouldn't be the sick patient if you didn't look like a sick patient."

They pushed through the downtown traffic, parting insurance agents and bankers, government lackeys and more bankers. When they finally made it to their planned spot, the corner was occupied. A filthy man strummed a guitar with two missing strings and nodded to passersby. He coughed spastically. A cloud of soot circulated around him. A cup of change sat on the sidewalk. It was empty.

“Pig-Pen,” Charlie said, clenching his fists. “That fucking amateur.”

It was their spot. Everyone knew that. Five days a week they set up shop on that corner for their performances. Only a complete idiot wouldn’t know that. Pig-Pen looked up, a smile spread across his ash-covered face, his eyes shining bright through the grime.

“Come on, let’s go,” Charlie said, turning to Linus. “I know another place.”

They walked past. Linus gave a little wave before they disappeared in the crowd. Charlie kept pushing forward. His mouth, like his mind, like his pace, was fast. He rattled off ideas, key words, emotional cues while Linus sucked his thumb.

“If you’re going to be a grumpy baby, then you can be a doctor, too, but I’ll be the main doctor who healed all the cancer of the gut in our patient, and you’re the doctor who is jealous of my success,” Charlie said. “But I swear if you mention sunscreen things are going to get messy.”

#

Boot Face gnawed its leg off during the night.

When Linus discovered it, crinkled in the corner like a stubbed cigar, he wrapped the crushed paw in perfume advertisements and set it beside the Great Pumpkin. The faint breeze brought fleeting scents of rot and French women. It was intoxicating, in its own way.

The final sacraments to the paw of Boot Face took most of the morning. It would have been faster, but Linus hadn’t eaten in days. Slipping in and out of consciousness, he prayed for the Great Pumpkin, for the mascot, for his empty stomach. He prayed to whoever might listen.

He dug his fingers into the dry soil beside the Great Pumpkin and buried the leg, hoping the severed essence would seep free for the pumpkin to reclaim. Ever since the weight of the stem had caved in the top of the pumpkin, Linus had been desperate. Then there was a moment of silence. Charlie practiced his Australian accent.

“Oy, mate.” “Ow, meet.” “Hoy, moite.”

“How did that one sound?” he said, nudging Linus.

“I didn’t hear.”

“Hoy, moite.”

Linus’s head drooped toward the ground, his gaze unfocused on the soil. “Huh?”

“You got to eat something,” Charlie said, pulling a piece of bologna out of his pocket. “Munch on this, buddy.”

“Thanks,” Linus said. He tore it into strips and slipped it through the cracks in the cage. Boot Face stopped licking the severed wound for a second to claw at the lunch meat with its good paw.

“He likes it,” Linus giggled.

#

Woodstock used to wake them up. It’d sit up on their shanty and sing as morning emerged above the overpass. But that was before the accident. Now they slept until Charlie had to piss.

It was a ritual now, a habit. He’d shake Linus awake on his way out, and their day began. But today the shanty was empty. Linus wasn’t asleep, hadn’t even thought about sleep. He’d been awake for hours, frantically smearing ranch dressing on the Great Pumpkin, racing against the ever-rising sun. Where he had gotten the dressing seemed of little importance as he stood on tippy toes, squeezing the family-sized jug over the top of the gourd, letting large ponds of buttermilk overflow and run down the side. There was something inspirational to Linus’s work.

Linus paused sporadically, just long enough to suck the ranch from his fingers, before squatting down to fill a crevasse of the pumpkin with a liberal amount of the white dressing. And when he finished coating one layer on the pumpkin, he began another, and when he emptied one jug of ranch, he opened another. He went around for an hour, two hours. Empty containers scattered around him; splashes of ranch and sweat covered his arms, absorbed into his denim, but he never stopped, never slowed.

Breakfast passed, and the morning commuter rush, too. Charlie waited in the heat and got their act prepared. He hoped that his friend would relax, that they would make it downtown before the lunch crowds—filled with grease and spare change—disappeared into their office buildings. But when it was clear that Linus would not, Charlie intervened.

First a poke, then a shove, and when that did not work, a slap against Linus's unshaven face. And when that too failed, he swung harder, hitting cheek, ear, neck. Glitter twinkled in the air with every strike. But the harder he smacked, the harder Linus worked. Boot Face sat calmly in its cage, its essence soothed by the violence.

When they had been nomads, roving from one strip mall to another, theirs stomachs filled with potato chips and jerky, they had been hardened. But that was long ago. Back when Sally would still turn up every now and then, begging Charlie to come with her. Now they were alone. Now they were settlers, and the blows against Linus's bruising body forced his breath against the damp pumpkin.

"Fine," Linus said, spitting blood on the dirt. "What do you want?"

For the first time he turned away from the pumpkin and saw Charlie and his black face.

"It's time for the role of your life," Charlie said, panting, his yellowed teeth blinking in and out from behind his blackened lips as he shook the can of spray paint, the little metal ball rattling like a child's toy.

And before Linus had managed to open his mouth to say that he cared more about the Great Pumpkin than money, than their stupid roles, than Charlie or himself, Charlie had already lifted the nozzle to his face.

"Close your eyes," he said. "Trust me."

#

"I'm a Nigerian prince," Charlie said. "You're my mute servant."

Linus scratched his scalp. Dried flakes of ranch collected on his shirt. The Great Pumpkin had drained him of what little energy he had. He sat silent, every inch of his thumb between his black lips.

“We’re rich. Enough gold to sink a whorehouse. But our accounts are frozen now, so we’re down and out.”

They squatted beside a copy shop as Charlie tried to explain how banking worked for the wealthy. Linus shifted his blanket, exposing a streak of uncovered white on his neck.

“Let me get that,” Charlie said.

A jet of black aerosol splashed against Linus. It sprayed his face and dripped down his neck. He coughed.

“Stop being such a grumpy baby,” Charlie said, tossing the spray paint in his sack. “You’re acting like that one obnoxious girl who used to complain all the time.”

“Lucy?” Linus said. “She’s my sister.”

“Well, she was a bitch.”

Linus sucked his thumb, the alkaloid taste of paint filling his mouth.

“*We’re Phishing, Charlie Brown* only works if we look trustworthy,” said Charlie, grinning. “Because here’s the key: I’ll tell them that we’ll pay them back triple when our royal accounts thaw or whatever.”

Linus coughed.

#

“You’re an Australian raccoon that is famous for your playful tricks and friendly demeanor,” Charlie said, letting go of his cart. He shifted the marching-band helmet back on top of his head. “And your name is Snoopy.”

The cart overflowed with stuffed animals, some missing plastic eyes, others limbs, all stained and muddled together. Boot Face hissed on top. Charlie hated to

improvise, but *It's the Outback, Charlie Brown* wasn't the worst thing he'd performed on the fly.

"Stop trying to bite everything," Charlie said, nudging the cage. The helmet fell again, tightening the chain around his neck. He paused to fix it, the stiff polyester jacket and shoulder pads taut around his pudgy arms. Every buckle and clasp of his Australian raccoon-trainer outfit jingled and sparkled in the sun.

It'd been a long day. Linus wouldn't get out from under his blanket, no matter how hard Charlie shoved him, no matter how much slime oozed from the pumpkin's base. So it was just Charlie, his marching-band outfit, and the feral raccoon waiting outside a coffee shop. It was not how he had planned the day.

#

Linus did not say a word to Charlie before leaving. There was nothing to say. No words would bring Boot Face back to the Great Pumpkin. Their mascot, the very symbol of pumpkin essence, was lost somewhere out there.

With his blanket and bedroll and favorite socks strapped to his back, he pulled his thumb from his mouth and whispered something to the Great Pumpkin. Then he turned his back and stumbled off down the interstate. Carrying the weight of hunger, he disappeared into the darkness to find the raccoon before it fell into the hands of an enemy.

Charlie slept fine and woke up refreshed. Loss was something he had grown accustomed to as the Peanuts gang crumbled over the years. Back when his mother died, and he realized he'd never hear her trumpet call again, he had cried. But now he went through his usual morning chores with a smile on his face. He flipped through the comics section of an aged newspaper and traced his outline on the yellowed strip. He watched the clouds and whistled Christmas songs to himself in, what he decided, was perfect pitch. He imagined writing a movie trilogy aimed at teenagers that would reward him with money and, of course, teenagers.

He did everything he could to avoid the pumpkin. But when there was nothing left to distract him, he peeked. It really was a great pumpkin, even with the brownish tint and wrinkled base. He stood up and punched it. And when that hurt more than expected, he punched it again.

"I hate you, pumpkin." And he did. He did hate it.

#

“You’re a ghost that no one can see or hear but me,” Charlie said in the half-finished clown outfit, his body slumped against the bus stop, his face pressed against the map of routes.

The people beside him nudged over a bit and checked the time, hoping their bus would arrive soon. Charlie did not notice.

“And, and, are you okay, I’ll say, and you’ll tell me yes, and are you going to die, I’ll say, and you’ll say no.” He sobbed. Tears and snot and makeup smeared against the Plexiglas. “And that will make me feel okay and everything.”

He went on like that. The sun set. Bus after bus left with him moaning, his ear pressed to the asphalt, trying to hear Linus’s heartbeat. He could not think of a single reason to get up. The commuters left, the drunks left, the bus stop closed. But Charlie remained, slumped in the corner with red eyes.

For hours he sat in the silence and watched the moon rise and sink. He made promises that were impossible to keep. He broke into tears. He wished that Linus would come back.

In the distance, a figure paced from trash can to trash can, its arms loaded with cans and bottles. When it made it close to the bus stop, Charlie looked up and wiped his nose.

“Linus?” he said.

“No, sir, just old Keith showing up,” the man said.

“Oh.”

“What’s going on here, anyway?” Keith said.

“You’re Alone, Charlie Brown.”

#

In the dream the Great Pumpkin grew larger and larger and larger until it was the size of the free health clinic but more orange and round with a large mouth that it opened and unrolled its enormous hot tongue that turned to steps, and Linus walked up and inside the Great Pumpkin's face and lived there and ate there and the seeds were made of gold so that he did not need to leave and Charlie didn't need to do stupid accents and acts trying to make a buck and then that didn't even matter in the end because outside he watched the stem of the Great Pumpkin grow and sharpen to an iron bar that rammed through Charlie's face, and then Linus turned around and saw himself in the Great Pumpkin mirror for the first time and saw not the Linus he had known for his whole life but a Linus with an orange tint and a rounded face and he knew then that he was turning into a Great Pumpkin himself.

#

"Has it been many moons since my departure?" Linus said upon waking, the pumpkin shading his face.

"Two days."

Charlie tried to pour some leftover ketchup into his friend's mouth, but Linus just coughed it up, spilling it across his striped shirt.

"Where did you find me?"

"Over there." Charlie pointed to the overgrown weeds under a distant bridge.

Linus nodded. "Yes, yes, that seems right." His chapped lips cracked with every word. Blood coagulated and crusted in the corners of his mouth. He closed his eyes.

"Goodbye," he said. What remained of his essence, the leathered skin and gaunt arms, was seeping into the soil. He sighed. A single breath gurgled out.

Charlie nudged his friend with the tip of his shoe. Nothing happened. How many times had he left a friend like this? How many of the gang were buried beside these highways? But this was different. Linus. Sweet, lovable Linus.

He kneeled down and said his goodbyes before draping the blue blanket over Linus's face. He stood up. The world seemed empty. Without Linus he was nobody.

Even his acts were gone. All he had left was Linus's "Great Pumpkin" obsession. He looked at it. He pulled out his copper-cutting knife.

Unfolding the blade, he leaned forward and dug it into the pumpkin's soggy flesh over Linus's head. Pressing his weight against the tool, he forced it through the thick meat, carving as big a hole as he could. Sweat streaked his arms. Tears trickled down his round cheeks. He didn't know what he expected, what he wanted. He cut and cut and cut until the hole burst open.

A jettison of pumpkin innards oozed out, squirting filament, seeds, and loose meat onto Linus's head. It flattened his hair and ran over his face, over his neck, over everything. He vanished under the pumpkin viscera, and yet the pumpkin stream showed no signs of slowing.

Charlie watched in silence. If Linus had drowned in pumpkin slime, it was, he decided, how he would have wanted to go. He thought about the past they had shared, the excitement and love spread out over backyards and baseball diamonds. He thought about the future they were supposed to share, rich and famous beyond their possible dreams. He sighed at the innards still leaking out. There'd never be another Linus. He sighed again.

"Goodbye," he said to the mound.

The mound rose. Just an inch at first, but soon it pulsed. It grew taller with every beat until a few fingers emerged from the pulp. They clawed at the opening until an arm erupted. Then a curly head of hair. Finally Linus sat up with great strength, his body rapt with energy, his face fresh as it had been during their comic days.

"Join me," he shouted, his voice potent and youthful. "Join me in the essence!"

And Charlie did. He slogged through and laid himself upon the pile of goop. The cool pumpkin innards oozed over his yellow shirt, his simple brown shoes.

And though they would later act like it had never happened, under pressure of life and fear of death, under the intoxication of the essence, and under the pumpkin innards that flowed down their faces, Linus kissed the round top of Charlie's head. Just once.

Ian Golding's fiction has appeared in *CutBank*, *Mid-American Review*, *Hobart*, *Pank*, and other journals. He is currently working on a novel.